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**Roots and fields: Excursions through place, space and local in hyperlocal media**

[Short title: Place, space and local in hyperlocal media]

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## **Roots and fields: Excursions through place, space and local in hyperlocal media**

**Abstract:** In 2012, UK charity Nesta announced Destination Local, a program focused on future developments in ‘hyperlocal media’ based on location-based technologies. The program’s first round funded an experimental portfolio of 10 small projects. In this paper, I present vignettes drawn from walking interviews with four of the project leaders, putting these into dialogue with phenomenological and practice-centered media theory, as well as growing interests in the geographies of media. My argument is that practices of so-called hyperlocal media should be understood via a phenomenological duality. On the one hand, as activities rooted in place: conducting media work though situated environments. Yet on the other hand, as inhabitations of field spaces: geographically dispersed social and technical worlds. This analysis suggests we step back in order to consider the conceptualization of place, space and the local itself in studies of ‘hyperlocal’ as an emergent form of media production.

**Key words:** hyperlocal media, journalism, local media, place and space, field theory, digital media, phenomenology, walking interviews

## **Introduction**

One Plough Place is a modest, low-rise brick and glass building just inside of the Corporation of the City of London. It hosts the offices of Nesta, an independent ‘innovation charity’ originally spawned from the New Labour era of British politics. Nesta describes itself, on its website, as ‘helping people and organisations bring great ideas to life’. The main floor is clean and cool: brightly colored furniture is set against opaque white dividers, under enormous cylindrical lighting fixtures. It was mid-July, 2015, and I was waiting in the reception area to speak with some of the Nesta staff involved in Destination Local, a funding program that was launched in 2012. Destination Local ran under the banner of hyperlocal media. This is a term with many meanings, but can generally be described as emergent forms of ‘very local’ digital media that are typically amateur and positioned as an alternative to the mainstream. Destination Local had a specific way into to the hyperlocal field. It was orientated to its futures: to the ‘next generation of local media services’ founded on location-based devices, data, platforms and infrastructures. It appealed to hopes and aspirations, against growing cultural anxieties about local media in a ‘post-newspaper age’ (see Kennedy, 2013; Nielsen, 2015).

I soon found that those at Nesta, and others directly involved in managing Destination Local, envisioned the program as a catalyst for a nascent media sector. An early, Nesta-commissioned report (Radcliffe, 2012), which inaugurated the program, had invoked the notion of a UK hyperlocal ‘space’ that included not only small hyperlocal publishers, but also conglomerated local media groups such as Newsquest and Trinity Mirror, and dominant digital media platforms such as Google and Facebook. Nesta’s intervention in this space, as I argue elsewhere (Rodgers, 2018 forthcoming), embodied a kind of informational philanthropy (cf. Lewis, 2012). It implicitly venerated a new kind of localism (see Wills, 2016), based on what Wilson (2012: 1266) calls the ‘digitization of location’. Nesta, as former program director Jon Kingsbury put it, saw itself “at the centre of this space” (Kingsbury, 2013). Through Destination Local, Nesta was undoubtedly creating new conditions of possibility for specific hyperlocal media practitioners; but it was also engaging hyperlocal media as an ‘opportunity’ to extend its reach, and consolidate its public impact, as a charity.

In this paper, I mobilize the relatively unique case of Nesta’s Destination Local program, specifically its first round, to consider how we might conceptualize place, space and local from the perspective of contemporary hyperlocal media practitioners. Drawing on vignettes from four walking interviews, as well as a larger study of the program, I seek to present hyperlocal media practices via a phenomenological duality.

On the one hand, as activities *rooted* in place: unfolding though situated environments. Yet on the other hand, as inhabitations of *field* spaces: geographically dispersed worlds that are both social and technical. In so doing, I emphasize Nesta's Destination Local program as more than a means to fund specific 'local' projects. It also crystallized a space of researchers, policy-makers, entrepreneurs and technologists, as well as an increasingly complex technical ecosystem of locational devices, data, platforms and infrastructures. While I do not present the Destination Local projects discussed in this paper as typical hyperlocal media outlets, I argue they provide an apt lens for stepping back and considering the conceptualization of place, space and the local itself in studies of this emergent form of media production.

### **Place, space and the (hyper)local**

It is often noted that the term hyperlocal carries no agreed definition. Rather, it flourishes as a metonym, used flexibly by its practitioners and researchers precisely because it is inherently vague (Barnett and Townend, 2015: 336-337). Nevertheless, the term is obviously suggestive. Not only does it invoke 'local' but its prefix 'hyper' suggests new extremes thereof: perhaps a newly energetic mediated localization; or perhaps a new heterogeneity of mediated localities. This spatialized suggestiveness remains relatively under-examined in the existing literature, which often has a

normative leaning, and is often authored by scholars who are also practitioners. This is certainly not to say there has been no discussion on definitional issues (e.g. Metzgar et al., 2011). However, the literature on hyperlocal media is more focused on compositional issues, for example the size, structure and business models of its outlets (Harte et al., 2016; van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014), the identities of its practitioners (Chadha, 2015), or its communicative values and characteristic practices (Dick, 2012; Paulussen and D'heer, 2013; Williams et al., 2015). There is nothing inherently wrong with focusing on the composition and values of hyperlocal media. However, it does reflect an under-addressed problem in the local media literature more generally: its apparent reluctance to step back and think more carefully about the conceptualization of 'local' in relation to media. Too often, the local is treated as self-evident. It is simply those media which are either orientated to or existing at a pre-existing 'local level'.

More than 20 years ago, Arjun Appadurai (1995) evocatively argued that localities are produced; they do not exist a priori. Hyperlocal media are of course distinguished by being oriented to localities named by a proper noun. That is, named localities such as streets, neighbourhoods, towns, cities or even regions. We might even say such named localities can accumulate an indeterminate, manifold reality beyond all possible descriptions or constructions of them. In other words, named localities can be examples of what Kripke (1980) called 'rigid designators'. But it does not follow that hyperlocal

media practices occur within a fixed local place that can be conflated with such named entities. As Hess and Waller (2017) argue, digitized local media must be set into a ‘geo-social’ context. They are at once anchored to named geographic territories, yet also positioned in globalized media spaces. This is why well-established commitments to the ideal of ‘localism’ in media policy and regulation (especially in the United States) are usually seen as highly ambiguous when examined in concrete instances (see Ali, 2017; Braman, 2007). As Dunbar-Hester (2013) argues in her account of debates around US low-power radio, discourses of localism tend to operate as a ‘boundary object’. The idea of localism is malleable, in that it can operate across a range of often-competing interests. Yet it also invokes a taken-for-granted idea of the local as an obdurate, ontological reality.

I would like to argue that two recent developments in contemporary media and cultural studies literatures provide an opening to address these ambiguities more directly. First, media studies has in recent years seen a notable growth of interests in, and critical engagements with, geographical concepts such as place and scale (e.g. Adams & Jansson, 2012; Fast et al., 2017) as well as new conversations between media and urban theory (e.g. Rodgers et al., 2014; McQuire, 2016). These literatures touching on the spatialities of media are highly diverse both theoretically and methodologically. However, they frequently overlap with a second important area: the recent turn to



theorizing media as practices (e.g. Bräuchler and Postill, 2010); a turn which arguably involves an inherently spatialized reorientation. In de-emphasizing media *per se* – “as objects, texts, apparatuses of perception or production processes” (Couldry, 2012: 35) – the practice turn invites an analysis of media that prioritizes its emergence through situated environments.

This intersection between the practice and spatial turns in media theory connects with a broadly phenomenological appreciation for the intricacies of everyday media experience (see also Markham and Rodgers, 2017). Shaun Moores’ recent advocacy for a ‘non-media centric media studies’ (Moores, 2012, drawing on Morley, 2009) illustrates this clearly. Drawing on the phenomenologically-inflected tradition of humanistic geography (e.g. Tuan, 1977) as well as more recent relational (Massey, 2005) and nonrepresentational approaches (e.g. Thrift, 2007), Moores explores media not as things, but as aspects of place-making. In particular, he adopts the strong priority phenomenological perspectives put on place over space, or more accurately, that put space into place (see Malpas, 2012), so that “spatiality and existence” become conjoined (Sloterdijk, 2012: 37). Under such a view, any given situation, however translocally connected, is always “‘in’ a place, already given over and involved with things, with persons, with our lives” (Malpas, 2006: 39). As Moores (2012) suggests, in this way,

media should not be seen as an externalized space that leave their mark on place, or make localities 'placeless'. Rather, media are relational aspects of place-making itself.

Moore's (2012) engagements with geography, practice theory and phenomenology are particularly helpful because they conceptualize media as emerging through place, yet at the same time, inherently involving more dispersed spaces of translocal connection. Yet there are limits to such turns to practice and phenomenology in media studies. Largely stemming from the audience studies tradition, such approaches generally focus on media practices of use and consumption. Without necessarily saying so, there is an implication "that the crucial cultural processes are those that transpire within acts of reception" (Straw, 2010: 210). In comparison, there is a dearth of thinking about the spatial dynamics of those practices ordinarily named as media production (see Morgan Parment and Rodgers, forthcoming). Hyperlocal and other media production practices also involve radically-contextualized and everyday kinds of place-making. Yet we clearly cannot understand such organized practices only through the fine-grained analysis of media-in-use. We also need to account for what Caldwell (2008) terms 'industrial reflexivity': the translocal spaces of a production culture that practitioners orient towards, and within which they take up positions.

Nesta's Destination Local program illustrated such a phenomenological duality very clearly. My conversations with program managers and consultants revealed a tendency to describe hyperlocal media not just in terms of localized places, but also as a UK-wide 'space' (see Rodgers, 2018 forthcoming). By this, they meant a space of UK hyperlocal media that was both social and technical. It included various social fields of practice – such as journalism, software development, philanthropy, advertising – for which hyperlocal media was seen to be a held-in-common concept. And it included the technical ecologies that Destination Local specifically identified as the future backbone of hyperlocal media: location-based devices, data, platforms and infrastructures. Although it would be possible to dismiss such talk of a hyperlocal 'space' as ambitious Nesta-speak, my analysis is that it was more than that. It suggested that the Destination Local program involved considerable reflexivity of and stakes in hyperlocal as a nascent media field.

The concept of field is most closely associated with Pierre Bourdieu's (e.g. 1990) theory of practice, which has attracted significant interest in media and cultural studies (e.g. Born, 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Most often paired with the concept of habitus (which is sometimes used to theorize place – see Casey, 2001; Moores, 2012: 59-61), fields to refer to the conditions of possibility for the embodied improvisation of the practicing habitus. As Bourdieu (2005: 30) put it, they are 'the sites of action and

reactions'. So, a media production field such as journalism – to which hyperlocal media are strongly anchored – can be seen as a space distributing rules, resources and positions, and at the same time, an orientational space for a game that is earnestly played (see Benson & Neveu, 2005; Rodgers, 2013).

Bourdieu's field theory is often seen however as either geographically anaemic or spatially reductive. In his book *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), fields typically appear across two-dimensions; a space of statistical social positions plotted onto an X-Y axis. More generally, Bourdieu's theory of practice is often accused of a latent structuralism, unable to adequately account for transformation (e.g. Born, 2010), and perhaps also lacking a language to account for technology, despite arguments suggesting otherwise (e.g. Sterne, 2003). Yet the notion of field can become a valuable heuristic for conceptualizing how 'local' gets valorized as a parameter for hyperlocal production practices. What is crucial, here, is that we bring Bourdieu's thinking back into conversation with its arguable phenomenological origins (see Throop and Murphy, 2002). If we do, 'fields' serve as a reminder that while media production practices are always already rooted in place, through those basic existential coordinates they are also oriented towards and positioned in field spaces. 'Local' media production, then, always already involves translocal social and technical conditions of possibility; it is not to be reduced to an essentialized local place or scale. Fields are less an objective domain,

juxtaposed against subjective places, but spaces – physical, technical, symbolic, social – that emerge through practical action in place (see Malpas, 2012). Therefore, hyperlocal media production practices do not so much emanate from the local. Rather, for such practices, local is a complex epistemological apparatus.

### **Four excursions through the hyperlocal**

I will turn now to a more empirically-oriented examination of these conceptual issues of place, space and the local, based on four walking interviews with project leaders funded under round one of Nesta's Destination Local program. The vignettes that I have reconstructed from these interviews provide fairly heterogeneous examples of hyperlocal media. In no small part, this is because they have been selected from the range of 10 projects funded in the first round of Destination Local, which were themselves quite deliberately selected by Nesta as an experimental portfolio. Destination Local funding was less aimed at project-by-project 'success' than demonstration; it was primarily a showcase of various aspects of hyperlocal futures. It not only presented different technological implementations and economic models, but varied geographies, with the selection panel taking care to select both urban and rural localities, and to represent all four nations of the UK.

In selecting four of these projects for closer examination, I likewise sought to maintain some degree of heterogeneity. I chose the four projects firstly because they were each oriented towards different professional fields, with distinct technical ambitions or problems. I also chose the projects based on their situatedness in specific geographies, with one focused on an inner-urban neighbourhood, one on a metropolitan suburb, one on a medium sized town, and one on a small rural village. So an important proviso is that the heterogeneity, or ‘hyper’ locality, of these vignettes or examples may be somewhat exaggerated from an empirical point of view, vis-à-vis hyperlocal media more generally. My emphasis here, however, is what these excursions highlight conceptually.

Each interview was organized as an audio-recorded walk through the local area related to the project under discussion. While I asked the participants to consider in advance a possible route, I made clear that the purpose of the walk was for an interview conversation; they were not expected to take me on a local tour. Each walk also involved seated conversation at some point. After parting ways with the participant, I retraced the walk, taking digital images, making observational and reflective notes, and sometimes consulting the audio recording. These interviews were set into a larger research corpus, which included extensive desk-based analysis of online and printed sources relating to the project. This was further augmented by research on Destination

Local and hyperlocal media more broadly, as well as interviews with some of those involved in the management of the program.

As will be clear from the vignettes, I have considered it important to use the walking interview as a descriptive and analytical lens, rather than just a means of data collection. By presenting each case via the walking excursion, I have been able, I think, to provide an account of 'local' media production practices as composed of roots and fields, or places and spaces. In my preliminary research into Destination Local, I had noticed that Nesta and others primarily spoke about a UK hyperlocal media space: one made of dispersed people, organizations and technologies. But on the other hand, there was a sense of the funded projects being indelibly connected to place: often a very particular form of place, a named locality, but place nonetheless. Walking interviews, as both data collection and writing method, provides a way to reveal and discuss the hyperlocal media projects through place, understood as the immediate environment and landscape unfolding to the lived body (Casey, 2001: 683). But at the same time, this method allowed for those lived experiences to involve the phenomenological appearance of more dispersed forms of reflexivity, emotions, sociality and technicity (see especially Anderson, 2004; Kusenbach, 2004). Thus, I intend for these vignettes to illuminate, if by proxy, the intrinsic relationships between place rootedness and field orientations in contemporary, digitized local media production.

*Broughton*



Figure 1: The former *Scotsman* building (now the Scotsman Hotel), Edinburgh. Source: Author.

Emerging from the train station, Aden Cole and I look across the railway corridor toward a spectacular view of Edinburgh's Royal Mile. Aden points out an ornate



building, the former offices of the *Scotsman* newspaper (Figure 1), which he describes, along with the *Edinburgh Evening News*, as a shadow of its former self. Despite retaining place-based titles, their journalists never get out into the places they cover, he says: ‘they have to book themselves out, and they’re compiling all their articles like battery hens ... a lot of them have no experience of Edinburgh; they’re just shipped in.’ Aden is not a professional journalist. He is a freelance copyeditor, specialising in large reference works and academic journals. But his passion is the *Spurtle*, a sparky print and online newspaper he edits with the help of a collection of volunteers. It is a publication that revels in its amateur appearance, and seeks to arouse local debates: a ‘spurtle’ refers a rod-shaped utensil used to stir traditional Scottish porridge. But the publication also increasingly inhabits an important position in Edinburgh’s social media space. Later, Aden would tell me how, particularly through its involvement in Twitter-based networks, the *Spurtle* often supplants the *Edinburgh Evening News* in debates and stories on planning issues and neighborhood politics.

We set off into Broughton, which Aden says ‘we laughingly call Spurtleshire.’ As we pass well-maintained squares, grand Georgian residences, bijou mews terraces and shops such as Louis Vuitton, one gets the impression of affluence. Later, we pass by signs that perhaps signal less affluence: Victorian tenements, industrial buildings, fledgling mosques and homeless shelters. The area is ambiguous, not just in

pronunciation (for some, it is 'Bruff-ton' but for most others 'Braw-ton') but geography. Despite its history as a medieval barony, and contemporary political geography as a community council area, Broughton, Aden says, mostly exists in people's heads.



Figure 2: Wall mural, Broughton, Edinburgh. Source: Author.

Leaving a narrow, cobbled laneway, Aden stops suddenly: 'Sorry, I hadn't really noticed this before.' We face a wall mural, recently created on a banal, empty

warehouse, otherwise bleeding rust (Figure 2). As Aden begins to snap some digital images, I take this moment to turn the conversation to his Destination Local proposal submitted with Kelcey Howe, a professional journalist managing the website of an environmental charity in nearby Leith. ‘Local Edge’, as they named their project, proposed to create a location-based mobile app. It had two dimensions: first, a QR-code based loyalty scheme, based on the participation of local independent shops; and second, a dynamic news stream aimed at younger people, who could add tips, comments and images related to Broughton. At this point in our walk, Aden describes the project, and its eventual failure, in these precise and succinct terms. Although he is not originally from Broughton, he has emotionally adopted the locality. And throughout our walk, at least, it is Broughton, and the *Spurtle*, which Aden keeps firmly in view.

We walk some considerable distance further; overall, this is the most epic walking interview undertaken in this study. Only once we are seated at a café do we return substantially to the Destination Local project. We are seated at almost the exact position from which Aden and Kelcey filmed their distinctly amateurish two-minute YouTube video – something required of all applicants applying for round one funding. Though they succeeded in obtaining the funding, Aden says that this was not the primary challenge. Instead, it was bringing their familiar concerns with the local area into contact with the unfamiliar worlds of web analytics and software development. Nesta

demanded significant audience information, and at that stage Aden had not been monitoring any analytics for the *Spurtle* website. He and Kelcey also struggled to liaise effectively with their software developer, who ran a small start-up, and seemed to inhabit a different world from their own. He put less effort into their project than they hoped for, and eventually moved on. ‘One of his partners moved to America where we couldn’t get him,’ Aden says, ‘and he went and got a really good job with Google and is now in Spain, or ... I don’t know where he’s gone.’

After our seated discussion, Aden suggests we take in a panoramic view of the area, leading me up the incline of Calton Hill, and discussing Destination Local as we go. We discuss the changes that have been made for round two of the program. Bigger sums of funding. Large-scale consortia. Phase one, Aden says, ‘was pretty haphazard’ by comparison:

It was all very fast and hard, and furious and exciting ... when we decided that we couldn’t bear it any longer and we wanted to give the money back, we couldn’t find out who to give it to ... it really was that, that they’d moved on, and it was actually more of an accounting problem for them to actually take it back.

Aden was not suggesting negligence, but that Nesta's Destination Local was operating at a different speed, and with a different orientation. It was less about successful projects, rather experimentation, and cultivating a UK hyperlocal 'space'. As Aden glibly concluded, 'they regarded us as lab rats, basically.'

### *Johnstone*



Figure 3: High Street, Johnstone. Source: Author.

I've arrived in Johnstone, 15 minutes' rail journey from Glasgow Central. Waiting in the station house, I gaze at a small café, which looks unchanged in many decades. Keir McIver – one-time project leader of the 'OurTown' Destination Local project – appears from the northbound platform. After quick mutual recognition, we are soon meeting and greeting, discussing the wet and chilly weather. We set off into town, walking along the high street (Figure 3). It is noisy: cars and trucks rumble past; and overhead, aircraft can be heard but not seen through the low-lying overcast clouds, making their final approach to Glasgow Airport, just over a mile away.

Keir begins: 'most of the Nesta Destination Local projects were set up by people who had a particular love for that area, maybe lived in the area.' His project was different. It was proposed when Keir was employed at Glasgow-based Newsquest Herald and Times Group, owned by US-based Gannett Company. OurTown was something like a locally-focused hybrid between Twitter, Facebook and Groupon. It offered what Keir calls a 'one-way', 'streamlined' platform for local businesses, politicians, clubs and organizations to communicate news, information and offers to subscribers.

Johnstone is not beset by poverty, but nor is it affluent. It is a former industrial mill town that today is a regional services center; as Keir says, 'it's kind of a town of many pubs, chip shops and betting shops.' Victorian block terraces intermix with decaying

1960s residential-commercial complexes; precariously independent shops contend with newer chain retailers such as Greggs, Poundland, Lidl and Aldi. We walk under the low underpass of one such 1960s complex, passing shuttered shops. Emerging into the open, onto a wet, granite plaza, we behold a new municipal facility – one of those combining a town hall with other local services. Keir says that, at the very beginning of the OurTown project, diggers had arrived to raze the old building that once stood here: ‘I think we actually had the very last ever meeting in the building before it got demolished ... So, it was a difficult time.’



Figure 4: Morrisons supermarket, Johnstone. Source: Author.

We leave the central high street area, heading west, passing by the town's claim to fame, the ruins of an extensive shoelace factory. We eventually walk along a fern-lined path, towards a large Morrisons supermarket (Figure 4). We settle into the café; around the corner is a peculiar, local heritage museum, built within the supermarket to satisfy a planning condition for building on this once industrial site. Later, the volunteers at this museum tell me that the nearby shoelace factory was supposed to be converted to housing, before the 2008 crash.

Despite having been employed by a local newspaper company, Keir is not a journalist, nor did his idea for OurTown stem from deep emotional ties to the area. 'I'm emotionally robotic,' he jokes, 'I am a machine that thinks in ones and zeroes, and business and commerce.' He came to Herald and Times Group as a web designer, and like many information technologists working in traditional print media, he was given considerable autonomy. Keir was, and is, enthusiastic about experimentation. In his spare time he is a keen maker, joining proficiencies in digital media, engineering and invention. Keir learned about the first round of Destination Local just a week before the application deadline. He quickly cobbled together a proposal for OurTown, an app based on his experience of living nearby, yet having little knowledge of, or connection to, local businesses, leisure groups, clubs or services. He tells me about preparing his proposal. How he put together his YouTube video proposal the night before the



deadline, writing the script and asking his wife to do the voiceover recording using an iPad. And, how when he showed it to his supervisor, he was quickly given the go-ahead: ‘So little supervision, it was scary’.

The OurTown app did launch, obtaining a small number of users, but it was eventually wound down, and Keir left Herald and Times for a new job. In hindsight, Keir seems to describe it as an experiment caught between three worlds: of the localised contingencies found in Johnstone; of a commercial print media organization; and of the hyperlocal ‘space’ assembled through Destination Local. Shortly after winning the funding, Herald and Times assigned Keir responsibility for a network of hyperlocal websites, taking on the work formerly performed by 20 staff. While Destination Local afforded freedom to experiment, its primary orientation to research and publicity over project success meant little financial oversight, leaving Keir without leverage vis-a-vis his employers. The OurTown project was allotted funding to hire a local representative, who conducted interviews in Johnstone, and organized launch events. But, Keir tells me cautiously, Herald and Times effectively put the program funding against their corporate bottom line: ‘it felt a bit, kind of, cynical.’

## *Welshpool*

As I extend my hand to greet Glynn Yates, I'm struck by the fortune of catching him during a short two week visit to Welshpool, his home town. During the past year, Glynn has been spending most of his time in the Middle East, where he works as a media and public relations consultant for a member of the Jordanian Royal Family. With the assistance of a near-to-full-time partner – like himself, a former newspaper journalist – he is nevertheless able to manage at a distance two popular and financially-successful local news websites: MyWelshpool and MyNewtown. Running since 2010, the sites cover not only Welshpool and Newtown, but a 30 mile belt of towns along the Severn River, all using these localities as hubs. Glynn's Destination Local project entailed two aspects. First, an expansion to two new localities – Radnor and Brecon – in the southern half of Powys, Wales' largest county. Both closed after 18 months, faltering due to the poor north-south transport links within Wales; the most efficient connections are with England, east to west. Second, the development of a web-based mobile app, based on evidence that readers were increasingly accessing the news sites using mobile devices. During his visit, Glynn and his partner will be meeting with a software developer to discuss options for 'monetizing' the app.



Figure 5: The Cross, Welshpool. Source: Author.

We are standing out front of The Royal Oak, a Georgian coaching inn that is situated at what Glynn calls ‘The Cross’, the heart of Welshpool (Figure 5). We begin to walk up Broad Street, the length of which is festooned with colorful bunting year-round.

‘Welshpool’s fared better than most in the recession, since 2008 struck,’ says Glynn. Just four miles from the border, the town is a gateway for travellers from the English Midlands headed to the Welsh coast. Its center boasts a well-presented mix of estate

agents, cafés, hairdressers and boutique shops, interspersed with national retail chains; the latter, Glynn says, is a good sign for a contemporary small town.

Glynn gestures at cars traveling up the road: ‘this whole area now is a one way system,’ he says. Along with a recently constructed Tesco supermarket, on the edge of town, this is by far the most talked about and controversial news story on MyWelshpool. But, Glynn says, ‘we never take sides.’ They carefully avoid the approach of the traditional campaigning newspaper. ‘I think people are a little bit tired of being told what to do ... we let the debate happen amongst people.’ In the Severn Valley, the site of such debate seems to be Facebook, not Twitter. ‘I don’t like to call it the working class social media,’ says Glynn, perhaps suggesting precisely that; ‘we get a much bigger audience, really, through those avenues.’ Around a third of their traffic comes via Facebook referrals, which has influenced the sorts of stories they cover and how they are circulated. Glynn notes that they have mimicked the social media practices of larger news outlets. Holding back key story information, using teaser language, asking questions: all to generate click-through and user comments.

Our walk takes a loop, passing the town hall, the main Welsh-Anglican church, a temporarily empty supermarket, and an art deco cinema redeveloped into a health center. In all, the walk is comparatively short, and Glynn seems more inclined to

continue our discussion sat down. Not for lack of local knowledge or connection; seemingly around every corner friends and acquaintances greet the international visitor. But, as we settle in by the window in a local pub, Glynn reveals himself as an avowed media entrepreneur. Participation in Destination Local seemed, for him, to align with an entrepreneurial digital media business proposition, focused on the local. Indeed, the launch of MyWelshpool and MyNewtown was met, he says, with an aggressive reaction from companies such as NWN Media, publisher of *The County Times*, a long-established weekly newspaper covering Powys country:

... and we're not strong enough to turn round and say, couple of guys from mid-Wales ... We've talked about it with Nesta, actually, when we were involved with Destination Local. We felt maybe there needs to be – you've got a newspaper society – maybe there needs to be a hyperlocal society, or something where there's a good, strong lobbying group, or at least, once a year, there's exchange of ideas.

## *Loddon*



Figure 6: WiSpire repeater mast, Holy Trinity Church, Loddon. Source: Author.

“So, this is the church?” I say. “This is the church,” responds Bryson Phillips. Our shoes crunch upon the gravel path leading us towards Holy Trinity, a 15<sup>th</sup> century church at the centre of Loddon, a small market town in Norfolk, England. Already visible on the church spire is a WiFi repeater mast (Figure 6), part of the WiSpire network, a project of the regional diocese that uses church towers to bring WiFi to poorly connected rural

communities. Bryson used a significant portion of his Destination Local funding to bring WiFi to Loddon, hopping along three such church towers. His project was named #21VC (meaning 21<sup>st</sup> century village correspondent, presumably primed for Twitter circulation). It sought to leverage such newly provided WiFi and create enclosures for video-based hyperlocal reporting, made financially viable through use of Addiply, his niche advertising technology for local audiences. In important respects, hyperlocal advertising technology is Bryson's main concern. Addiply had received funding through a parallel stream of Destination Local focused on less locally-specific software platforms, led by the UK government's then Technology Strategy Board.

But, we don't talk about #21VC or Addiply straight away. We sit down on a wooden bench outside the church entrance, and Bryson takes a rather deep dive into his own journey up to this point. The short version is that Bryson spent many years as the football writer for the Norwich evening newspaper before taking redundancy in 2006 to start his own football blog. He soon confronted problems with making his website financially viable. The algorithmic architectures and commercial assumptions of existing advertising platforms were poorly attuned to specifically local advertising markets. His own version of this story is told through softly-spoken anecdotes of serendipitous encounters, evocative analogies to industries such as craft brewing, tangents into the theories of various thinkers and media evangelists: Clay Shirky, Craig

Newmark, Joseph Tainter, Cindy Gallop, Eric Schmidt. He speaks in rhymes ('right now, 99% of advertising technology is built for Ted Baker, not the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker'). He makes easy use of metaphor and alliteration ('what's needed', he says, is 'a holy trinity ... of connectivity, content and commerce'). He name checks contacts at Nesta, and consultants who worked on Destination Local and similar programs. With good reason, he is seen, and sees himself, as an able participant in the UK hyperlocal space.



Figure 7: Wifi receiver, Loddon. Source: Author.



Bryson's overall proposition is complex, a gigantic jigsaw puzzle which tries to align very local journalism, rural internet connectivity and innovation in advertising technologies. #21VC was the only project funded in the first round of Destination Local that emphasized infrastructure. It sought to combat urban-centric assumptions of pervasive wireless connectivity, and prevailing beliefs that underlying infrastructures are no longer a concern for content producers. We leave the wooden bench, and take a walk along the High Street. At one end of the walk is Bryson's former house, the rooftop of which still hosts the sole WiFi receiver in Loddon (Figure 7), despite the project having long ended. At the other end of the walk, we arrive at boat docks, which lead to The Broads, an extensive patchwork of navigable rivers and lakes. Between here and his former house, at least 10 WiFi receivers would have established town-wide coverage – had he not run out of funds. Boaters visiting Loddon would have been greeted, he says, not just by free WiFi, but Loddon-based video news content, targeted offers from local businesses, news about comedy nights from the nearby arts centre.

We settle into a local tearoom and continue our discussion. It is a conversation intermittently mediated by Bryson using his iPad, presenting to me, via somewhat idiosyncratic slides, various ideas and entrepreneurial proposals. Bryson tells me that, more recently, he had been involved in a bid for £760,000 of funding within the second round of Destination Local. Effectively a significant upscaling of the #21VC project, he

was part of a consortium that included Microsoft, Hewlett Packard, Norfolk County Council and MML Telecom, which, he says, ‘would’ve played the role of WiSpire.’ But the project fell apart: MML Telecom pulled out in the final stages; and, he says, he sensed that Innovate UK – the successor to Technology Strategy Board, again partnered with Nesta – was unsympathetic to the journalistic content component of the proposal. I innocently remark that he seems to need the fortune of a more substantial investor, to demonstrate the potential of his ideas at a larger scale. In so doing, I unintentionally provoke what was for me a somewhat awkward end to our discussion. Quite candidly, Bryson goes into some detail about his struggles, financial and personal, brought on by the instability of his fledgling entrepreneurial pursuits. Later, seated in my car, I reflect that while Bryson firmly inhabits the ‘space’ of hyperlocal media – he’s part of that media and academic scene – he also seems pinched, trapped even, by his situated circumstances.

### **Place, space and local: Reconceptualizing hyperlocal media**

The preceding vignettes have presented hyperlocal media as involving inherent relationships of place, space and local. Of these concepts, I have treated place most fundamentally, though pointedly not because the cases discussed here are specifically related to local media. Rather, place is fundamental here as an originary condition of

possibility for all existence, in general (Malpas, 2012). While the broad premise of each walking interview was a hyperlocal media project, anchored to a larger named place, the excursion itself was composed by movement through a more immediate and contingent environment and landscape (Casey, 2001). The appearance of such myriad features as churches, mosques, chain retailers, industrial ruins, gravel paths, wooden benches, panoramic views or low-lying overcast clouds invited a peripatetically-derived sense of place to be presented in each vignette.

This peripatetic method, however, was not only deployed to write more richly descriptive or finely-grained accounts of place, though I maintain this as important. My intent was also to reveal anchorings between places and spaces, in which rootedness in place could give way to differential orientations to field spaces. Clearly evident in each of the accounts, for example, are orientations and positionings towards, within and against the journalistic field. Here we might recall Aden Cole's somewhat dismissive remarks about the established Edinburgh-based media, made as we gazed at the ornate *Scotsman* newspaper building. His positioning in the journalistic field was ambiguous. He was not a professional, yet he displayed complex emotional investments and commitments to Broughton; consequently, specifically local journalism was tacitly understood to be a 'game' worth playing (Bourdieu calls this 'illusio'), even from an amateur positioning. The excursion with Keir McIver had a markedly different tone. For

him, Johnstone was not a subject of affection but an area with objective ‘needs’, to be met through orientations and positionings in relation to the field of information technology, particularly software design and development. This is a field space often seen to be at odds with journalism (Rodgers, 2015). While Aden Cole was self-avowedly at sea when it came to the world of the digital, Keir McIver was by contrast at home. His Johnstone project was firmly imagined as a software experiment: an HTML5, location-based subscription service in which he deployed his acquired expertise as a web designer, not to mention his interests in digital invention and making.

The orientations and positionings revealed through these excursions were not only related to the field spaces of professions or organizations, but also technical ecologies, in particular of location-based data, devices, platforms, standards and infrastructures. For example, each of the projects discussed here were thrown into the spaces assembled by what José van Dijck (2013) describes as ‘connective media’: large-scale, commercialized and inter-operable platforms and services such as Google and Facebook. As each walking discussion unfolded, it did not take long for these backgrounded platform spaces to be mentioned, since they both afford and impose proprietary algorithmic environments through which the ‘local’ is already being sifted, sorted and mediated. Some of the projects – such as Keir McIver’s one-way service for Johnstone, or Bryson Phillips’ content and infrastructure project in Loddon – attempted

to create new enclosures that would operate at least somewhat independently of such platforms. Others – such as Glynn Yates’ local news services in Mid-Wales – were more imbued with, and parasitic on, the technical and symbolic logics of platforms such as Facebook.

Yet such orientations and positionings are not reducible to mere reactionary manoeuvres in the face of algorithmic functionalities or platforms. While algorithms do often operate silently and unnoticed, evident here were degrees of awareness, reflexivity and knowledge about the social power of algorithms (Beer, 2016), and digital presence in general (Couldry et al., 2016). This is clear not only within these vignettes, but also in Nesta’s Destination Local program as a whole, with its emphasis on research and public engagement activities about hyperlocal media as an emergent field. As I argue elsewhere (Rodgers, 2018 forthcoming), Destination Local represents a relatively distinctive attempt to anticipate and problematize a location-based future (cf. Wilson, 2012), and specifically to assemble and animate a related field space for UK hyperlocal media practices.

How, then, are these hyperlocal projects ‘local’? For sure, clearly observable across all four vignettes are what Heidegger might call ‘care structures’ of the local (cf. Scannell, 1996: 144-178). By this, I mean they are all caught up in a naturalized concern for

the local, as something that is self-evident and taken for granted; it simply matters, or 'is'. This self-evidence of local is, as I mentioned earlier, a complex epistemological apparatus, supported for example by the obduracy of named places, local institutions and, increasingly, digitally-mediated delineations of local such as the boundaries established in Google maps, or localities indexed through Facebook. Because of this complexity, each vignette expresses different phenomenological preoccupations with the local or very local. Consider, for example, their varied kinds of connection to the named localities that helped give meaning to their projects. For Aden Cole, Broughton was an adopted home and subject of emotional interest, attachment and fascination. Keir McIver's Johnstone was more of an opportunistic space, a locality with certain posited 'needs' that might be met with an experimental mobile subscription platform. For Glynn Yates, Welshpool was a localized business concern, managed at-a-distance, even as it was also his place of upbringing. And Loddon, for Bryson Phillips, was a one-time home also serving as a memorial for a complex, unrealized entrepreneurial proposition. In any of these accounts, falling back on a taken-for-granted, 'authentic' notion of locality would clearly be misguided. In important respects, it would distance us from their differential preoccupations with local or hyperlocal as forms of media production.

Place, space and local have for these reasons been deployed more epistemologically than ontologically in this paper. Space and place, in particular, are concepts that are as often conflated as distinguished in ordinary language (Malpas, 2012: 232); they follow no rules and are open to various kinds of manipulation (Massey, 2005: 166). In employing place and space in this way, I have analysed how the hyperlocal media experiments of Nesta's Destination Local program transpired through practices both rooted in situ, and at the same time, acting and reacting to geographically-dispersed and technologically layered fields. Here, 'local' emerges as a set of immanent orientations and stakes for specific fields of media production practice. Hyperlocal media are interesting developments in computational and networked culture because of the ways in which they bring together several fields of practice and technical ecologies under an (often implicit) political commitment to localism (see also Rodgers, 2018 forthcoming). If we want to meaningfully attend to such practices, we will not find, and should not seek, solace in a taken-for-granted localism. We must see such media production practices as translocally implicated; and, we must find such practices inhabiting and making all manner of place, not just of the named locality.

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